

## The Return to Attrition: Warfare in the Late Nation-State Era

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume VI, Issue 6 (December 2007)

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*Strategic Insights* is a bi-monthly electronic journal produced by the Center for Contemporary Conflict at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

### Introduction

Security analysts have struggled over the preceding years to come to terms with the challenges of the current era. They have offered a range of visions on the shape of future warfare, some focusing on the roots of conflicts and others on the types of warfare that will be waged. U.S. defense officials, seeing a chaotic and unpredictable world, went so far as to move away from threat-based planning toward a “capabilities-based” approach,<sup>[2]</sup> focusing on the proverbial hammers, rather than the specific types of nails. None of these approaches has taken a step back to search for fundamental changes in the broader socio-political nature of our current era, to estimate how these changes will affect both coming conflicts and our ability to respond to those conflicts, and to build strategies pragmatically tailored to the nature and limitations of the age.

The dominant characteristic of the current era, which will define both the tenor of conflict around the world and our ability to react to it, is the declining state power of the world’s most developed nation-states. Even as instability in the developing world increases in the coming years, the means available to America and her allies for dealing with the chaotic international environment of the twenty-first century will be increasingly constrained. The most developed nation-states are not in danger of being overtaken, but their ability to deal with adversaries ranging from rising regional powers to non-state actors will be limited compared to that at the heights of the nation-state period. As a result, warfare will be limited, but prevalent; centered in the peripheral fields of the developing world, where political unrest and economic penetration will be spark and fuel for regional power struggles and resultant conflict. Planning and preparation for warfare over the coming century must begin with a broader assessment of the characteristics of our current era and their effect on states and states’ ability to wage warfare. From this basis, the nature of potential threats and the appropriate strategies states should follow to deal with them become much clearer.

The current era did not begin with the collapse of the twin towers on 9/11 or even the fall of the Berlin Wall. Rather, it came in quietly, a product of evolution more than revolution, sometime after the Allied triumph of 1945 that ended an unlimited war of annihilation. For at least the past quarter-century, the state power of the most developed nation-states has been on the wane, ushering in a period of limited warfare that has yet to be fully grasped by strategic planners and politicians across the world. The argument is two-fold. First, state power, that portion of national power that can be mobilized and controlled by the state government to serve its ends, is declining as state governments’ extractive power and capacity for independent action wanes in this late nation-state period. This decline is uneven and is likely to be most pronounced in the most

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>DEC 2007</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2007 to 00-00-2007</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>The Return to Attrition: Warfare in the Late Nation-State Era</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Naval Postgraduate School,Center for Contemporary Conflict,1 University Circle,Monterey,CA,93943</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT <b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>14</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			

developed nation-states. Second, due to this waning state power and the strongly-held illusion that governments have access to a greater portion of national power than is truly the case, policy-makers must realistically assess capabilities and set strategies and policies appropriate to this limited power. This means a turn away from the annihilatory military strategies of the nationalist period and a return to the more circumscribed strategies of attrition that were used prior to its rise. These conditions have been with us since sometime around the middle of the twentieth century, but their prominence has grown significantly since the end of the Cold War.

The effects of this era are unevenly distributed, but the new constraints will be felt most acutely in the leading nation-states, where governments have become accustomed to high levels of state power. These developed states will find themselves increasingly constrained even as they must deal with the conflicts that will shape the future of the developing world, as ethnic splinters and former colonial states attempt to sort out a stable political order over the coming decades. These states, many of which are pursuing aggressive nationalism in order to become nation-states themselves, will continue to be the world's trouble spots. The world's nation-state powers will be forced to find new strategies, appropriate to the limitations of the era, in order to deal with these trouble spots.

For practitioners of warfare, this period brings uncomfortable, but not unprecedented challenges. The waning power of the nation-state government and the growing independence of people from government have produced an era dominated by limited forms of warfare for the first time since the rise of nationalism. Warfare is limited in the sense that states will generally be unable to pursue the complete prostration of their enemies, as was the case in many of the epic wars of the last two centuries. More circumscribed ways, ends, and means will characterize wars of this period, although individual actions may be every bit as bloody and chaotic as any battle in history. Our adversaries recognize the nature of this era, and have turned to limited and asymmetric strategies, forcing America and her allies out of their comfort zone. The buzzwords of the day—insurgency, asymmetry, netwar, and fourth-generation war—are simply attempts to quantify a return to limited forms of warfare. Such wars call for a strategy of attrition, a much different type of strategy than the all-out war of annihilation that has become America's preferred mode of battle.

War of annihilation seeks the complete prostration of the enemy in unconditional surrender. War of attrition is a more circumscribed form that uses various tools, from battle, to maneuver, to other elements of national power, to exhaust the enemy in to acquiescence. Less clear-cut and rapid, this form has often been necessary in history when state power has been limited or adversaries have refused to come into open annihilatory battle. This form of war is difficult to embrace, especially for America, where both the public and the national security community are predisposed to rapid and decisive victories, massing technological and economic advantages against enemy weaknesses to bring a clear-cut resolution to conflict.<sup>[3]</sup> Americans desire their conflicts to be “a championship boxing match, fought in plain view at high noon and settled by a knockout punch.” Unfortunately, the reality of warfare in many ages has often been more like “a thousand separate wrestling matches, fought in the dark and won by tripping the opponent.”<sup>[4]</sup>

American defense officials must come to terms, first, with the nature of this era and the constraints that it will place on warfare. In the first and second sections below, the effects of previous ages on warfare will be laid out and the characteristics of the current age will be defined. Stemming from this analysis, defense planners must prepare themselves to confront the likely threats of the coming century with strategies suited to the conditions at hand. In the third section, I will discuss the looming threats and likely sources of conflict over the next 50 to 100 years and will broadly sketch how the American military establishment must be prepared to pursue policy ends through uncomfortable strategies of attrition. Critical adjustments must be made in the defense establishment in order to be prepared for the challenges presented by such strategies.

This period is one of evolution, not revolution. The nation-state is not dead, but the power of nation-state governments is on the decline. Social and technological developments bring new

challenges to the battlefield and empower sub-state groups from gangs to insurgent cells, but they have not revolutionarily changed the nature of war. The fundamental challenge at hand is to recognize the characteristics and limitations of the current era as they affect not only our potential adversaries, but also our own capacity to act. By using strategies unsuited to the nature of this era, we attempt to fight a style of war from a bygone era at the peril of defeat in this one.

## Something New Under the Sun?

In the decade since the end of the Cold War, scholars have offered theses on the end of history, the clash of civilizations, the arc of instability, the rise and fall of empires, suppositions about the emergence of the market-state, and the typologies of fourth- and even fifth-generation warfare.<sup>[5]</sup> Each offers thoughts on how new, even revolutionary phenomena will change international relations and warfare in unprecedented ways. Each holds some elements of truth. Some focus on the new strategies, tactics, and organizational structures that will be used by state and non-state actors, while others examine various aspects of the international system to explain the crux of conflict in the coming century. Each predicts that a revolutionary development in politics, ideology, technology, or social organization has created a bold new era. None attempts to place this new era within the context of the ebb and flow of warfare, which has varied throughout history with the strength of its socio-political base, nor to develop that idea with regard to the potential sources of conflict over the remainder of the century. A broader, perhaps less elegant view is required.

Our difficulty in dealing with current challenges owes at least as much to our lack of recognition of our own strengths and limitations in this era as it does to any radical new technologies or strategies on the part of our adversaries. Indeed, some argue that there is “nothing new under the sun” and that these groups are simply fighting small wars with modern weapons in ways that would have been wholly familiar to Napoleon and even Alexander.<sup>[6]</sup> If we truly face nothing new under the sun, then why are rogue bands of extremists, criminals, tribesmen, and nationalist insurgents presenting such problems to states combating them around the globe today? Why is political unrest and violence bubbling up in states throughout the developing world? Why do conservative pundits bemoan the lack of support, stamina, and mobilization of the American public behind this Global War? Why are generals and military analysts mulling over whether or not an extended deployment of 160,000 U.S. troops can be sustained without “breaking” the military of the most powerful nation in the world? The answer is that nothing has changed in the nature of warfare, but the both particular characteristics of many states and spirit of the age have begun to shift. This shift must be recognized and accounted for in order to adopt strategies appropriate to the time.

The amazing social and technological changes that have confronted this world over the past years seem to be constantly accelerating, provoking predictions of radical change in the nature of politics and warfare. Yet, some of the grizzled, skeptical, and often conservative-minded senior practitioners of land warfare are not quick to buy off on new merchandise. Having studied millennia of war, many are more comfortable with continuities than with radical departures. Most of these skeptics, however, are comfortable with the familiar terms of an old soldier who was able to define change in warfare through a simple concept, providing continuity through the ages.

While some commentators argue that unprecedented new generations of war are in the offing, or that we have reached a “post-Clausewitzian” era, Clausewitz would readily recognize that the changes afoot stem from shifts that are taking place in his “trinity” of war. The trinity that makes up war is composed of the blind natural force of the people, the creative realm of the commander, and the rational subordination of these factors to reason as an instrument of policy by a government or, in our age especially, other political leadership.<sup>[7]</sup>

Clausewitz noted that as the social, political, cultural, technological, and economic contexts of the era changed, the balance between the three elements of the trinity has shifted with dramatic

results on the conduct of warfare. This is no trifling matter, for soldiers and statesmen who have tried to pursue strategies without regard to changes in this trinity of warfare have generally met resounding failure. Clausewitz warned that “the aims that a belligerent adopts, and the resources he employs, must be governed by the particular characteristics of his own position; but they will also conform to the spirit of the age and to its general character.”<sup>[8]</sup>

So what is the spirit of this age and its general character? What is the status of Clausewitz’s trinity? Nation-state governments are waning in capacity and control even as the populace is growing in power and independence. Thus, while the blind natural force of the masses is as powerful as ever, state governments are less able to harness and subordinate it as an instrument of policy. In the most developed nation-states, this means that governments and militaries cannot expect the massive mobilizations of personnel and economic might, the nationalistic fervor, or the unflinching popular support they received in the past. They will be waging wars with limited means, requiring a limitation of ways and ends. A review of numerous trends in state power will show that governments’ abilities to extract resources and put them to their use are on the decline.

While governments are weaker, the “blind natural force” of the populace holds more power than ever before. This power comes in the form of commercially available military weapons and equipment, ubiquitous advanced communications and transportation, and technological knowledge that facilitates asymmetric informational and kinetic attacks. This popular power acts differently with regard to the Clausewitzian trinity than it has in the past. While the state is undoubtedly still the major actor on the scene, it will be argued that for the first time since the rise of the nation-state, the element of blind natural force of the populace at the state level is, to a degree, becoming disconnected from the rational subordination of the government and the creative spirit of the military commander. In the fragile states of the developing world, the weakening of governments and the rising power of the populace presents the threat of intrastate war, fought between trinitarian adversaries<sup>[9]</sup> at the state and sub-state level. These sub-state combatants, possessing the full complement of Clausewitz’s trinity, are not peer competitors with the state, but their ability to bedevil states’ plans is already clear.

These observations are based on Clausewitz’s nearly two-hundred year old concept, which was in turn based on his study of warfare back to antiquity. Clausewitz is not alone in looking to the balance between state and society to understand the power that stands behind war-making ability. Neoclassical realists, recognizing that state governments cannot always extract and freely utilize societal resources to their ends, have also focused on the relationship between the state and the society to determine how much power is actually at the disposal of state governments. In this discussion of warfare, state power can be narrowly defined as the ability of the state as a governmental institution to make and implement foreign policy (to include military operations), based on its capacity to extract and mobilize resources from domestic society and its capacity for action independent of domestic constraints.<sup>[10]</sup> Stated differently, state power is “that portion of national power that the government can extract for its purposes and reflects the ease with which central decisionmakers can achieve their ends.”<sup>[11]</sup> Raw power calculations are insufficient for determining the true power balance because state leaders cannot always extract and mobilize resources and pursue policies freely, constricting their ability to use the full range of national power.<sup>[12]</sup> This is why Clausewitz looked not only to the government and the military, instruments of the state, but also to the society in order to determine the foundation of war-making might.

It is imperative that strategic planners take a serious accounting of the Clausewitzian trinity, the relationship between state and society, and the resultant state power available for use today. Much of current strategic thinking and planning is based firmly on the hard won experiences of international diplomacy and conflict at the height nation-state era, but the nation-state of today is not the same as that of 1938 or 1945. If the past is any indication, the disconnect between government and the populace and decreasing state power should portend an era of limited war. However, the empowerment of individual citizens, corporations, and other sub-state forces also suggests that this era of limited war will be characterized by the spread of violence at the sub-

state level. Indeed, the majority of wars and organized political violence since the end of World War II have fit this pattern.<sup>[13]</sup> What is significant is that this analysis attributes this period of limited warfare and increasing sub-state violence to permanent changes in the nature of the nation-state, rather than to a temporary condition such as the bipolar system of the Cold War, the current unipolar system, nuclear weapons, or post-Cold War upheaval.

Prior to the first major expressions of nationalism at the end of the eighteenth century, warfare had been rather limited. Although states were growing in consolidation and capability, the citizenry remained separated from warfare. Standing armies were first developed as mercenary forces, then through recruitment from willing, often underprivileged sectors of the population. Foreign policy and warfare remained largely an affair between monarchs, with relatively little involvement of the blind natural force of the populace. The constraints in the means available to governments and commanders kept the ends sought circumscribed and warfare remained limited throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>[15]</sup> It was quite a shock, then, when the monarchs of Europe tasted the blind natural force of the people as the French Revolution unleashed a new era of warfare.

On August 23, 1793, the *levee en masse* brought the force of France's population into the fray, putting over three-quarters of a million men under arms. The mercenary armies of Europe stood no chance against such a force. Beyond the increase in numbers, the "democratization of the army" in revolutionary France united the force behind the idea of defending their country, prompting men to endure greater hardships, fight more determinedly, and venture farther from their bases. At first, the other powers of Europe rejected the new French ways of war, but they were soon forced to follow suit in the face of French successes.<sup>[16]</sup>

The rise of the mass army connotes more than simple jump in troop numbers. For a military to truly be a mass army, it must be able to maintain its size and combat power despite the challenges of prolonged combat. In the modern era, this requires an educated and indoctrinated citizenry and a society mobilized at the hand of the government to provide material support and manpower reinforcements to offset rapid combat losses. Mass mobilization and increased dispersion on the battlefield in the face of deadlier weapons demanded that states cultivate nationalism as an ideology that motivated and bound society behind the policy aims of the government. States introduced standard, compulsory education that produced literate citizens and inculcated a common linguistic, high cultural, and historical outlook that cemented a national identity and a loyalty to the nation-state. In turn, nationalism placed the power of the people squarely behind the state's policies, increasing the intensity of warfare,<sup>[17]</sup> until "the sole aim of war was to overthrow the opponent. Not until he was prostrate was it considered possible to pause and try to reconcile the opposing interests." Clausewitz observed that when the third element of the trinity was unleashed, "war, untrammelled by any conventional restraints, had broken loose in all its elemental fury. This was due to the peoples' new share in these great affairs of the state."<sup>[18]</sup>

Successful military and political leaders adjusted their strategies in accordance with the contraction and expansion of warfare through these ages. Following on Clausewitz's assessment of the limited and unlimited forms of wars, German military historian Hans Delbruck distinguished between strategies of annihilation and attrition. As war tended toward the extreme, states pursued strategies of annihilation. In annihilatory wars, victory is sought through the complete prostration of the enemy. The commander seeks battle above all else and pursues the enemy until he is completely incapable of further resistance.<sup>[19]</sup> When the forces and capabilities at the commander's disposal are great and the ends desired are major, war of annihilation is the obvious choice. This, in the American experience, is how wars are won.

Yet sometimes it is impossible to win wars in this way. Through history, due to limited means or uncooperative opponents, commanders have also found themselves forced to follow strategies of attrition. Attrition strategy, translated from the German *Ermattungsstrategie*, does not connote



simple-mindedly amassing body count to bleed the enemy into submission. Rather, in contrast to annihilation, it connotes a strategy to exhaust the enemy's will to continue when it becomes impossible or undesirable to completely prostrate an enemy. The ends pursued in a war of attrition must be more circumscribed, and commanders must choose between a range of tools, seeking over time to exhaust the enemy's will to resist, whereby he will accept the terms of peace.<sup>[20]</sup> As much as soldiers may want to wage war of annihilation, it is impossible to annihilate the enemy if the forces or will are lacking, or if the enemy cannot be fixed and dispatched of wholesale. For this reason, Delbruck labels attrition warfare as "one of the most complicated but most frequent phenomena in world history."<sup>[21]</sup>

These issues will be returned to, but the contrast between these two styles of warfare has accompanied the contraction and expansion of warfare since antiquity. Since the Napoleonic wars, the strategy of annihilation has been ascendant as the base of warfare swelled with the mobilized fury of the nation-state. Military professionals, political leaders, and even the public expect victory to come quickly, on annihilatory terms. There is no reason to expect otherwise, unless the centuries-old trend of expansion in warfare (one trend in a series of ups and downs) has passed its peak.

Well before the World Wars of the twentieth century, Clausewitz asked, "Will this [unlimited war] always be the case in the future? From now on will every war in Europe be waged with the full resources of the state, and therefore have to be fought only over major issues that affect the people? Or shall we again see a gradual separation taking place between government and people?"<sup>[22]</sup>

While the scope of war continued to expand for more than a century after his death, culminating in the two cataclysmic World Wars of the twentieth century, we are once again swinging back toward a more limited form of war due to a gradual separation between government and people. Specifically, the decline in state power and the growing independence of populations from their governments has had two results. First, interstate war is increasingly limited in scope and aims, due to a narrowing of the nation-state's power and the growing disconnect from the blind natural fury of the population. Second, intrastate war is increasingly violent and protracted due to the relative rise in power of the people and their sub-state political-military leaders. In both cases, however, the limited form of the strategy of attrition is ascendant.

Many look at technology, such as the stark threat of nuclear Armageddon, or international structure, such as the bipolar arrangement of the Cold War, to explain the shape of warfare over the last sixty years. These issues surely loomed large over warfare, but they do not explain why virulent intrastate wars and limited interstate wars have continued to be a fixture even after the demise of the Soviet Union. Clausewitz suggests we look elsewhere for our answer: "Very few of the new manifestations in war can be ascribed to new inventions or new departures in ideas. They result mainly from the transformation of society and new social conditions."<sup>[23]</sup> Let us look, then, at what has changed in society and its conditions, how that has affected the state, and how that in turn affects warfare.

## **The Decline of State Power**

If a state government aims to pursue rational ends autonomously (Clausewitz's role for the government in the trinity) it must be able to extract resources from the territory and the population and to turn those resources (means) to its ends through strategy. If the extractive capacity of the nation-state is in decline, then its state power must be as well. Government power to extract resources is indeed waning, especially amongst the most developed democratic states. Active cultivation of nationalism and the concomitant societal support of the nation-state government are on the downturn. Armies are shrinking and increasingly dependent on private contractor support. Meanwhile society is gaining power and independence through economic development, changing

perceptions of government, and the empowerment engendered by technological advances. These phenomena are robbing states of their capacity to act boldly in the international arena, yet the illusion of residual state power provides leaders with dangerous yearnings that may lead to overstretch.

National power consists of those elements that, in sum, constitute the reservoir of power potentially available to the nation for use domestically or internationally. This is the reservoir from which the state government can draw, based on its extractive capacity. While there is no definitive list of the elements of national power, Morgenthau listed geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, national character, national morale, quality of diplomacy, and quality of government. A review of these elements of national power will show that even where national power has expanded the state's capacity to extract and mobilize that power has waned, leaving the government with limited means and a circumscribed base for foreign policy and war.

Starting with the more concrete elements of national power (geography, natural resources, and industrial capacity) it would seem that these aspects are relatively constant contributors to national and even state power. Most nation-states today have approximately the same geography and resource endowment as they did a half-century ago, and often greater industrial capacity. Yet, numerous factors have weakened states' grasp on these elements. For example, although Morgenthau acknowledged that geography is one of the most enduring sources of national power, he admitted that geography declined in importance from the beginning of the 1800s until the middle of the twentieth century due to the effects of advances in communications and transportation.<sup>[24]</sup> This trend has only accelerated since he wrote. A new combination of social networking, advanced communications technology, and increasing ease of travel allowed a non-state network of terrorists to shatter America's feeling of comfortable geographic isolation on 9/11. Technology has not and will not erase the factors on the ground that have influenced international relations for thousands of years, but the increasing ease by which people and ideas move has robbed fortress-nations of some degree of their power.

Like geography, natural resources would seem to be a fairly constant factor. Some states are graced with territories that are resource-rich, while others are not. A number of things have changed, however. Burgeoning populations and booming economies have greatly increased resource requirements, making resource self-sufficiency a thing of the past. Furthermore, resources are tied up in commercial contracts and traded around the world, reducing many state governments' unfettered access to their resources, especially in anything less than an emergency of major proportions.

Not only must a state possess raw materials, but it must also have the requisite industrial capabilities to turn these raw materials into infrastructure, goods, and weapons in order to create and project power. During the days of the World Wars, the Great Powers had a lock on production from the extraction of raw materials (at home or in colonized or conquered territories) to the manufacture of the finished product. Today, the globalized market economy has sought efficiencies by seeking the most cost efficient venues for extracting resources and various levels of manufacturing. For example, basic, labor intensive manufacturing is carried out in the developing world where labor is cheap, while more advanced processes are done where workers have the requisite training and skills. Resultantly, the industrial capacity of the world has increased greatly, but in many ways, nation-states are less prepared for mass wartime mobilization than they were in 1938. Owing to the global market economy and the increasing complexity of manufactured goods, relatively few products are transformed from raw material into retail good in one country today. States no longer have an iron grip on production from cradle to grave, while multi-national corporations increasingly do.

The world population has soared since the World Wars, but current demographic trends in many of the most developed nations threaten to rob states of manpower and revenue. Birth rates have



fallen and life expectancy has risen in the developed world to the extent that many states are facing the problems of aging populations. This trend reduces national economic productivity even as it shoulders state and society with higher costs of caring for its elderly. It also reduces the manpower and economic resources available to the state for warfare. This trend is predicted to hit European powers, Japan, and China hardest, but the United States is also facing an aging population. The huge costs of aging populations are likely to encroach significantly on military spending in the world's major powers. While this trend may reduce the likelihood of great power war, it will limit the ability of these powers to maintain a robust international presence, thereby removing a significant check on conflict in the developing world.[\[25\]](#)

Beyond these physical characteristics, other elements of national power rest on the relationship between the government and the populace. Military preparedness, national morale, national character, quality of government, and quality of diplomacy all require that the citizens stand behind governments' policies and that the government has a relatively free hand to extract support and to act. States have lost ground recently in each of these categories of power as the populace has grown more powerful and less willing to cede power to the government. Significantly, the transfer of many roles from the public to the private sector has robbed governments of capacity and legitimacy. These trends have contributed to a growing disconnect between governments and the populace.

The most significant factor in uniting populations behind nation-state governments has been nationalism. Nationalism, a major factor in states' extractive power and the historical driver behind mass armies and annihilatory warfare, has declined significantly in most of the world's leading powers. States that once pursued nationalism as a means for producing mass armies have largely left these formations behind, opting instead for smaller, more technologically developed militaries. Over the course of the twentieth century, European states blanketed by a nuclear umbrella could forgo the nationalistic indoctrination that preparedness for mass mobilization would have otherwise required. Blatantly nationalistic historians, in vogue prior to the World Wars, generally disappeared from the mainstream after World War II. A number of influences, from the repugnance of Hitler's blend of nationalism and racism to the rise of non-European nations as powers during World War II, combined to debunk unbridled nationalistic ideology and national or ethnic superiority in the histories written in the West.[\[26\]](#)

A number of phenomena have shaken public trust in government. The proliferation of unfettered and ever-more instant media coverage of government scandals and fiascos, along with the often bumbling performance of many governments in crises throughout the latter part of the twentieth century surely contributed to a growing sense of distrust amongst populations of even the most advanced democracies. Throughout the advanced democratic states in North America, Europe, and Japan, there is evidence of mounting dissatisfaction with government. This trend has been "longest and clearest" in the United States over the past 25 years. In one important indicator of dissatisfaction, only 29 percent of American respondents in 1964 agreed that "the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves." By 1998 that percentage had increased to 63 percent. Similar evidence has been documented for the democracies of Europe and Japan.[\[27\]](#) Populations that do not trust their government cannot be mobilized to the extent that they were at the peak of trust in the nation-state. Significantly, this can be seen in the resistance to taxation in a number of developed nation-states, not least of which is the United States.[\[28\]](#)

Driven itself by the decline of resources available to governments and the growing demands of the population, privatization is a major phenomenon in the waning of state power. Financially-constrained governments have been forced to look for more efficient ways of providing services to their populations. Unable to keep pace with growth in a number of areas, governments have turned to private sector companies to build and manage roads, administer prisons, provide domestic security, and even perform many military functions. While finding the most efficient practices makes economic sense, privatization robs government of the chance to prove its worth

to the citizens by providing quality services and infrastructure. At the same time, the transfer of many tasks to the private sector saps state capacity for independent action. This phenomenon is especially striking in the security sector.

The state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force has long been the *sine qua non* of its capacity to rule over its territory. That monopoly of force has recently begun to degrade for the first time since the rise of the nation-state. Private citizens now hold more military weapons than do governments and both governments and individuals are turning to private security contractors for internal and external policing and formerly-military tasks.<sup>[29]</sup> In the United States, private security forces draw more spending and have more manpower and weapons than governmental police forces. Britain, likewise has more private than public security forces. This is more than a simple shift of security roles to a more efficient private sector force. It is accompanied by "diminishing confidence in the ability of government security forces to manage the dangers properly."<sup>[30]</sup>

Military preparedness of nation-states, a major element of national power, has also been impacted by privatization. Within states, the transfer of infrastructure and critical functions to the private sector complicates security planning. Many high-value targets and critical vulnerabilities are no longer government facilities, but rather are owned and operated by the private sector,<sup>[31]</sup> making planning, implementation, and oversight of security measures more complicated. More to the point, military functions themselves have been privatized by governments throughout the world.

Due to recent events in Iraq, it is now well-known that private contractors are relied upon to carry out many tasks once performed by military personnel. In Iraq, over 180,000 civilians of various nationalities are employed under U.S. government contracts. As many as 30,000 of these are private security contractors, most of whom are contracted by the Department of Defense.<sup>[32]</sup> Contractors do everything from logistics support and food services to convoy security. Militaries under increasing financial pressure, especially with the post-Cold War draw-downs, found that by outsourcing more mundane tasks to contractors they could continue to afford the showcase weapons and programs they had grown to love. This trend expanded over the last decade, to the point that the U.S. military, at its current size and force structure, could not carry out the mission in Iraq without contractor support.<sup>[33]</sup> Many states have become reliant on high levels of contractor support to carry out their military operations.<sup>[34]</sup>

The expansion of private military companies is part and parcel of the new era of warfare. As the government wanes in power and loses a degree of support in the base of its population, it becomes difficult to mobilize citizen soldiers. Instead of calling for more volunteers or instituting conscription, governments find it much easier to turn to the market, finding a surplus of former military members, many of whom were cashiered in the post-Cold War draw-downs.<sup>[35]</sup> Contractors provide states with a ready pool of military capacity, allowing government soldiers to be focused on the highest priority tasks. They also allow states to flesh out their ranks without having to mobilize or risk disenfranchising the population. There are serious drawbacks to privatization, however, that may add to the woes of the nation-state as an institution.

Even as private security companies grow in size, many states are finding it difficult to man their military forces. Many states downsized their military forces, anticipating a "peace dividend" at the end of the Cold War. Even after 9/11, the percentage of the U.S. population employed in the active duty military remains at a low not seen since before Pearl Harbor.<sup>[36]</sup> Furthermore, states are drawing their forces "predominantly from certain—often disadvantaged—social groups."<sup>[37]</sup> These trends have both weakened state power and narrowed the base of popular support and involvement on which warfare rests. Furthermore, as states lean more on their reserve forces to flesh out their armies, they are forced to demand greater dislocation on the part of citizen soldiers, their families, and their employers,<sup>[38]</sup> further reducing the state's independent capacity for action.

In sum, these phenomena have yielded an era of significantly reduced state power. More specifically, while the array of military hardware at the hands of today's governments is fearsome, this military machine is backed by a greatly constricted popular base. In 2001, P.W. Singer, an expert on military privatization, observed, "Not since the eighteenth century has there been such reliance on private soldiers to accomplish tasks directly affecting the tactical and strategic success of military engagement."<sup>[39]</sup> This transition from the mass armies of the nationalistic period back toward the small, professional armies like those of the *ancien regime* must be accompanied by a similar transition in grand strategy.

## Conflict in Our Era: Its Roots and the Strategic Requirement

Warfare in our time will change apace with political and social trends, just as it has since the dawn of political violence. The constricting base of state power and the swing away from unlimited mass warfare is not unprecedented, but the combination of weak state governments and empowered populaces presents unique challenges. These will come in various shapes, from non-state terrorist networks, to unstable and failing regimes, to developing regional powers that will attempt to use nationalism, populism, and economic expansion to increase their power. The danger for the most developed nation-states, and especially the United States, is the temptation of overstretch through strategies unsuited to the age and its limitations.

How, then, should the United States prepare to face the challenges of the century ahead? The waning power of the nation-state impacts the United States especially sharply for two reasons. First, because America is now accustomed to being the most powerful nation-state, it is especially dependent on its power in the conduct of foreign policy. Second, America's way of war is built around its preeminent nation-state power, making the transition to fighting messier and more limited wars in this new era especially difficult.<sup>[40]</sup> Military historian Russell Weigley wrote, "At the beginning, when American military resources were still slight, America made a promising beginning in the nurture of strategists of attrition; but the wealth of the country and its adoption of unlimited aims in war cut that development short, until the strategy of annihilation became characteristically the American way in war."<sup>[41]</sup> Strategic leaders in the United States must make a conscious effort to recognize this bias, to acknowledge the need for a change in strategy due to the current conditions, and to set about preparing the U.S. military and foreign policy apparatus for the challenges of attrition.

The coming battles will not lend themselves to rapid, precision solutions by the overwhelming technological and tactical superiority of Western armed forces. Rather than massed battle against a like foe, conflicts are more likely to be messy combinations of local, regional, and global interests and actors, requiring a nuanced approach specific to each case. Over the coming decades, the greatest risk of unrest comes from those states, mostly in the developing world, that have yet to define a sustainable political order. Many of these states, both ethnic splinters and post-colonial states, are struggling to keep a lid on unrest and political reform through offering economic advances, yet the growth and dislocation caused by modernization often exacerbate instability.<sup>[42]</sup> The result is a confluence of sub-state tension and regional economic inter-penetration that will act like spark and tinder for regional conflict. The main flashpoints for conflict of all kinds reside in the developing world, where Western officials are least comfortable and knowledgeable.

In these trouble areas, strategists should not expect adversaries to present themselves for open warfare. The futility of facing today's most advanced militaries in open battle has been amply demonstrated, from Vietnam to Iraq. Rather, adversaries will continue to pursue indirect and asymmetric warfare. They will attempt to attrite America's will, its power, and its capacity for action. Not only are today's most advanced nation-states being pushed toward attrition warfare by their own conditions, but the enemy, too, has chosen attrition warfare as his preferred mode of battle.

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of these potential flashpoints in the developing world is that they are becoming increasingly penetrated by great power economic interests. American, European, Chinese, Russian, and Indian companies (both private and state-owned) are quickly penetrating deeper into the new markets of the developing world. The booming growth is improving the quality of life for many, but it is also causing the sorts of dislocation that can lead to heightened insecurity and unrest. As shaky states and violent sub-state and non-state actors begin to create havoc in international markets, great powers can be expected to step forward and defend their interests as they always have. This is where intrastate and low-level interstate war in the developing world could turn into proxy war between regional and great powers. In a different scenario, such a proxy fight could give way to open, but limited conflict between regional powers' forces on neutral soil. Those who posit that interstate war is a thing of the past are most likely in for a rude awakening. In all of these cases, however, annihilation of the enemy will be all but impossible.

These conditions require a return to a mode of strategy that has been out of favor for over two centuries: attrition. The waning of state power and the rising and independent power of the masses both point to this need. Limited in forces, capacity for independent action, and public support, nation-state governments will not be able to assemble the vast armies and demand the deep sacrifices that annihilatory war entails. Furthermore, even a fully mobilized nation-state cannot always force its opponents into annihilatory battle, especially when confronting the non-state and sub-state forces empowered by the social and technological characteristics of the age. If al-Qaeda concentrated on the desert steppes of central Asia, American and NATO forces could annihilate them in half a day's work. The enemy has a vote, however, and most adversaries will never accept annihilatory battle with Western forces. Thus, military and political leaders must study and accept the old lessons of attrition warfare, and adjust their strategic ways and ends accordingly.

In order to prepare for this coming century of conflict, strategists should begin by plotting a conceptual map of the developing world's likely flashpoints, then overlaying regional and global interests. Resource contracts, water rights interests, labor and product markets, weapons deals, infrastructure development projects, and the like should all be considered to determine who has a stake in these areas and how high their tolerance for loss will be; a low tolerance for loss on a given issue increasing the lengths the power will go to protect its interest. Those areas with both spark and dry tinder should be pegged for special attention. From this conceptual map, military leaders can begin to prepare their strategies and educate their troops to deal with the complex, multi-faceted conflicts that are likely to arise. They can shape the battlefield through security cooperation and engagement. They can seek the sorts of non-linear, non-annihilatory strategies and tactics that will be needed to win in conflicts that combine issues ranging from local tribal feuds to global energy supply disputes. They can educate, train, and equip based on sound strategic estimates in order to stand ready for the challenge. If they refuse to do these things, if they insist on focusing solely on the employment of weapons effects and the return to conventional big battle, they risk repeating the tragedies of generals past.

Homer's epic poem on the Trojan War is not often looked to for strategic lessons, but even this ancient story holds a warning for those who chase decision in battle beyond the limitations of the age. In pressing the attack on the Greek army, Hector, leader of the Trojans, succeeded in reuniting their forces and angering their greatest warrior. The result was tragedy, both personal for Hector and general for the Trojans. He did not heed his limitations and the constraints of warfare in his age. In the words of Barry Strauss, "The Trojans followed the wrong strategy. They should have let the Greeks tire themselves out.... Impatient, arrogant, and hungry for glory, Hector could not accept low-intensity tactics in a defensive strategy; he went after decisive battle."<sup>[43]</sup> Like Hector, many today are "addicted to a heroic illusion of decisive victory."<sup>[44]</sup> They want their Gaugamela, their Cannae. They want to turn the corner, break the enemy's back, to crush the rebellion in short order, yet these are heroic illusions in the current era. The high noon battle cannot be fought when the adversaries do not show up, choosing instead to sucker punch

you as you leave the ring. The decisive victory cannot be swiftly gained when the roots of conflict are layered from local gang wars to regional power struggles. These complex conflicts require a longer, non-linear view. This is the reality of warfare in this late nation-state era, and if it is overlooked for a heroic illusion, then leaders are setting themselves up for a tragedy of epic proportions.

## About the Author

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